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6/24/98

NSC BRIEFING

25 JANUARY 1956

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SOUTH VIETNAM

I. President Diem, whose regime has faced no major crises since the Binh Xuyen gangsters were driven out of Saigon last spring, has finally announced date (4 March) for long-promised assembly elections.

A. First job for 123 assembly members will be approval of government-drafted constitution.

B. Delay in setting date for election (first scheduled for Dec '55) has been caused by government's careful preparations, aimed at keeping everything under control.

1. Control efforts have alienated number of former pro-government elements brought charges of dictatorship against Diem.

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2. However, Diem justifies tight controls on grounds his government still at war with Viet Minh.

C. Actual setting of election date is reflection government's confidence.

[I. Security situation, although vastly improved since last spring, still far from satisfactory.

A. Although Binh Xuyen destroyed (and its boss now refugee in France), combat-effectiveness of remaining Hoa Hao rebels (in southwest) has been bucked-up by Viet Minh aid, guidance.

B. In clash with Hoa Hao on 13 Jan, Vietnamese army suffered heaviest casualties in any single action since end of war (61 killed and missing, including Battalion commander).

C. Army now has more than 20,000 troops deployed against some 3,200 Hoa Hao.

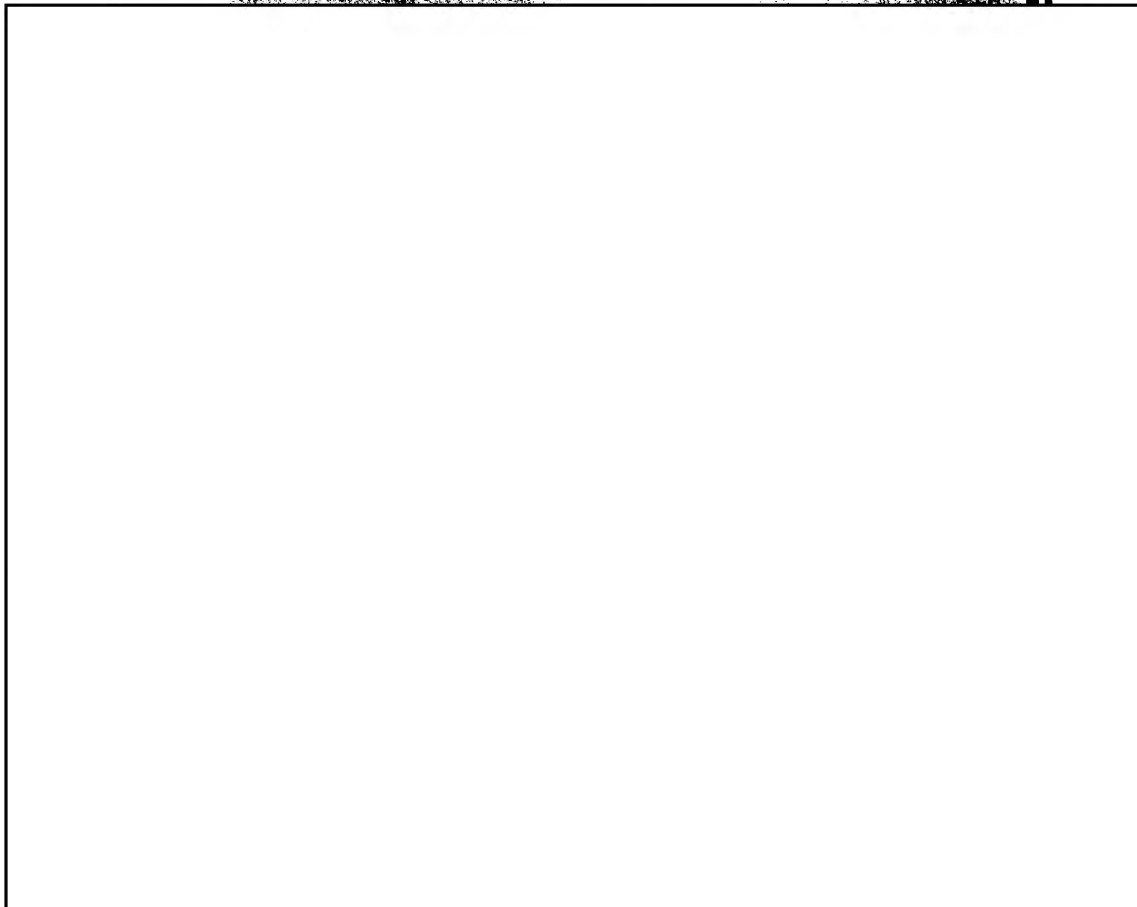
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I D. By alliance with Hoa Hao rebels, Viet  
Minh manages to fight Diem and at same  
time avoid open violation Geneva terms.  
III. Viet Minh link with Hoa Hao is only one of  
many angles its anti-Diem effort.

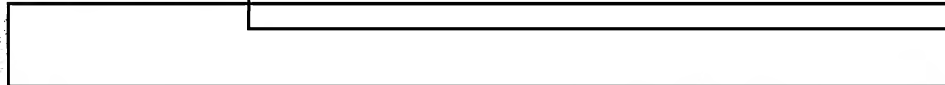
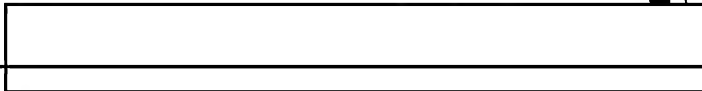
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IV. Viet Minh effort apparently not tied to any  
timetable:



A. Hanoi violently denounced Diem's march  
elections plans as US-inspired plot to  
stage unification effort. Cables for

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1. Viet Minh similarly denounced last October's referendum on Bao Dai, but turnout was good and Diem got 98% of vote.
  - B. Absence of interference last Oct. is indication of Viet Minh's unwillingness to show hand before time ripe.
  - C. But gradual improvement of Diem's security services also an important factor.
- V. Even after March elections, Diem will still face problem of his "inheritance" from Geneva --all Vietnam elections for unification, called for in July '56.
- A. He adamantly refuses to accept commitments made by France at '56 Geneva conference.
  - B. French have neither intention nor capability of meeting these commitments: Expeditionary Corps down to about 21,000 men.

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1. Diem has asked for complete withdrawal of Corps, anticipating that his relations with French government will be more difficult if Republican Front is installed.
  2. Such a government in Paris might complicate matters by new emphasis on Sainteny mission, diplomatic pressure for strict adherence to Geneva terms.
- C. But, although future of ICC is cloudy, even Indians--who chair it--appear to recognize all-Vietnam elections now virtually out of question.

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